



Annada Thakur

Annada Thakur was born of a brahmin family in Chittagong, West Bengal, India, and came to Calcutta to study Ayurvedic medicine. His family did not approve of this decision, considering such work impure for a brahmin. However, he graduated Ayurvedic college, though he never practiced as a doctor. He wished to remain celibate and possibly become a renunciant, but his mother on her deathbed said that Annada must either declare lifelong celibacy then and there, or he must have a marriage arranged for him. He left the decision to her, and she arranged a marriage for him with a young woman named Manikuntala. After the marriage, Thakur's mother made a remarkable recovery, which was attributed to the auspicious influence of the bride.

Thakur began a business in Calcutta manufacturing Ayurvedic remedies, but he was subject to visions and trances which made work difficult for him. In his autobiography, he speaks about his first significant vision, when he saw a statue of Kali carried by four girls through the streets. However, nobody else on the street saw them, and he was told by the people he questioned about the vision that he was crazy. When he later did meditation on Kali, he fell into a week-long trance state, in which he had continuous visions of her play (*lila*).

When his normal state returned after a week, his friends told him that he had gone mad. During that time he was cared for by his friends Girish and Shachin, even though he had beaten Girish during this period of mental instability. He asked them not to tell his parents about it. While in trance, he

had narrated poems to Kali, Krishna and Ramakrishna, which revealed to his friends that he was a devotee. A few days later his father came to Calcutta, and took him back to his family in his native village. There he had many dreams of renunciants.

His mother was also subject to revelatory dreams, and claimed to know herbs for medicines from her dreams. When Annada had a severe illness as an infant, and doctors had given up hope, she sat before a statue of Mangalachandi (a form of the goddess) and had a vision. She saw a woman beckoning, who said that Annada would be cured if she would offer her ritual worship (she later recognized this figure to be the goddess Adya Shakti Kali). When Annada returned home, his mother had a dream in which her personal deity appeared, telling her to let Annada go away to be a monk or *sadhu*. She cried the next day, but let him leave Chittagong.

Annada came back to Calcutta, and once again tried to work at the Ayurvedic dispensary. However, the dead saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa appeared in a dream, telling him to shave his head and bathe in the Ganges. Then he told Annada to bring back the statue which he would find hidden at Eden Gardens, a park in Calcutta, beneath linked pakur and coconut trees. He was to take along three other devotees, observe silence, keep the image as concealed as possible, and follow future instructions. He took three friends along, and went out early in the morning to Eden Gardens. He found the trees by the water's edge, and the statue was lying in the mud beneath the water. He stayed silent and covered it with a cloth, and Annada and his friends returned home.

The statue turned out to be made of black marble, a nude Kali about one foot high. Though covered with mud it was intact. She had her hair in three matted locks, and wore a crown and carried a scimitar. People in the vicinity heard about it and came to see it. They said that the statue was alive, and that its eyes were sparkling.

Annada did ritual worship or *puja* to the statue, and gave out the goddess' sacred food (*prasada*). Suddenly he perceived that everybody had become an image of the goddess, and even children looked like her image in miniature. His friends feared that he would go insane again. When his friend's wife Bimala Ma put a garland around the statue, he cried out and prostrated himself, and stayed in the room for two days. He was fed with the goddess' food by his friends, but his mind was elsewhere. He got up and locked the

statue in a trunk, and again fainted.

He saw a dream vision of the goddess Kali in the form of a sixteen year old girl. Her eyes were as bright as those of the statue, and she wore a red-bordered sari and shell bracelets. She gave him a command, ordering him to immerse the statue in the Ganges the next day. He awoke, and refused to do it, and dreamed again of Kali as a woman with loose hair and bloodshot eyes, angry and dreadful, with a newborn baby in her lap. She threatened him, and told him that disaster would befall him if he did not immerse the statue. She dashed the child against the floor, breaking its skull, so that it lay in a pool of blood. This, she told him, would happen to him. Then she appeared in the form of his aunt Choto Ma, whom he had always liked. She told him to get the statue photographed, and then immerse it afterwards. When he asked why, she said,

"I do not like to be worshiped at one place only. So I won't remain installed at a particular place. I shall be with all my devotees. Have me immersed in the Ganga... I do not want to be worshiped according to the Shastric (formal) rites alone. If anyone pays homage and gives offerings to me, saying in the simple and sincere language of the heart, [something] such as "O My Mother, take this food, wear this garment" and then uses those things himself, it will be regarded as an act of worship. The prayer of a simple and sincere heart constitutes my worship."

However, she told him that he could not keep the statue, and she threatened him. She said, "I am your antagonistic force; if you keep me, the strength of your enemies will increase, your [goals] will not be fulfilled... and your family line will be[come] extinct." She did relent a bit, saying "If you desire to worship me in this particular form, go to Varanasi, build a new temple there and have an image like this made of eight metals installed in the temple and then worship that image... If you do so, I shall reveal myself there in that image... I will reveal myself in any image you may invoke me in with devotion."

He announced his decision to immerse the statue the next day, and was met with resistance from his friends and their relatives. Some of them told him to keep the statue and get money from the people who would visit it, and some museum representatives came and said that the statue was ancient and from Buddhist times, but he refused to give it to any of the museums. He had the statue photographed professionally, and word spread quickly that it was to be immersed. Many local people came to worship it, among whom the

prostitutes showed great devotion.

He went to immerse the statue, followed by a large crowd of people, and he sang, "Dwell in my heart, O Mother Bhavani." He threw the statue from a boat into the middle of the Ganges River. He fainted afterwards, and was in bed for three days. He was periodically awakened by his friends, who fed him, and then he went back to sleep. The goddess appeared to him in a dream, again in the form of his aunt Choto Ma, and announced, "My name is Adya Shakti. I should be worshiped as Adya Ma." She then narrated a hymn to herself which he was to write down, and tell to others. When he awakened, he told his friends about the dream. They said that many people who had taken photos of the statue had had dreams telling them to immerse the photographs in the Ganges.

He planned to go to Varanasi and set up a new temple to Adya Shakti there, as she had suggested he do earlier. However, the goddess changed her mind. She appeared in a dream in the form of a sixteen year old girl, telling him that serving parents is the duty of a son. "Father is religion personified; father is as high as heaven itself," but "Superior even to father is mother, for bearing the child in her womb and bringing it up. So the mother is the greatest object of reverence in the three worlds." She told him not to go to Varanasi, but to stay in Calcutta and worship her there.

Again he obeyed her, and he stayed in Calcutta and periodically visited his parents. He attempted to practice medicine, but he came to the conclusion that he was unable to be a physician. Indeed, he stated that he got frightened and cried and felt suffocated when he thought of following that profession. He tried writing as a field, and wrote a play which was to be performed, but he went temporarily insane during this period, and the play was never staged or produced.

He lived mostly with friends, as a sort of informal house priest, and he would pray for the good of the household. In one case, when a child fell ill, he used the goddess' technique of coercion. He prayed, "Oh Mother, if any calamity befalls this household then you also will get involved. Your holy name shall be disgraced; and nobody will keep your photo nor worship you any longer." Adya answered him in a dream, appearing as an old woman with ragged clothes and disheveled hair. She said, "I am meting out the punishment they deserve for keeping me neglected. They took my picture for worshiping; but they left it in a most wretched condition; how can they avoid the consequences thereof?" He later found the neglected photo under a pile of

clothes, partly eaten by white ants. The picture was framed and worshiped, and the ill son recovered.

Annada also had dream revelations which predicted births and deaths, and showed cures. He made little mention of his wife in his autobiography, saying only that she would get upset when he fell into trances. The relationship appears to have been a celibate one. His major emotional involvement seems to have been with Adya Shakti Kali. Further information on the origin of the Adya Shakti statue came to Annada during meditation. He saw his sacred thread catch on fire and he pulled it off, and then he fainted. Annada awoke finding himself being cared for by a sadhu, who told him to stay alone and meditate for three days. He did so, and had a dream revelation. In the dream, he learned that the statue that he found at Eden Gardens was originally called the Mother of Gayadham, and presided over a temple on a hill in Gaya, a holy city of Buddhism located in Bihar. An epidemic broke out among the hill tribes, and the hill men threatened to shatter the statue and burn it if the Mother would not save them from the disease. He saw the same sadhu who had cared for him in this dream, in his previous life as a sadhu who had lived in Gaya. The sadhu had received a dream command to save the goddess' statue, and take it to Bengal. He did so, and hid it in the jungle which later became Eden Gardens. It remained hidden there until it was found by Annada Thakur, and revealed to be Adya Shakti Kali.

Annada travelled through India, visiting both Shakta and Vaishnava religious sites, and he bemoaned the infighting and hostility between these two groups. He spent six years in Varanasi. Towards the end of his life, Annada had a dream vision of Ramakrishna, who told him that his life would soon end. Annada asked how he might best serve humanity, and Ramakrishna told him to serve his parents for ten years and be a householder, and then practice sadhana while living on the banks of the Ganges. He also told Annada to establish a temple.

In the dream vision, Ramakrishna showed him a complex image of three temples. The first was on the back of a large swan, with a golden spire and gems in the walls. On the altar was a living statue (*jagat murti*) of Ramakrishna. The second temple was on the chest of Shiva, who was laying like a corpse, and Adya Shakti stood upon him. The third temple was on Garuda, with Radha and Krishna standing within the OM symbol (he emphasizes that this temple was "not inferior" to the previous two). The three temples then merged into one temple, and the three images at the altar fused

into one joint statue. Ramakrishna was at the bottom, with the word "Guru" written, then in the center above him was Adya Shakti, with the words "Knowledge and Work," and on top were Radha and Krishna in the OM, with the word "Love." The temple was made of marble. Ramakrishna said that the temple should be built in West Bengal, in "Kalisthan" (the land of Kali), between the temple of Nakuleshwar Shiva at Kalighat and Dakshineswar Shiva at Ariadaha. He said that it would establish faith in people, and that at least three devotees a year will see manifestations of the divine there. He gave instructions for how temple ritual should be handled, and a variety of ashramas built. While the image of the Guru and Radha and Krishna may be of wood, stone, metal, or clay, the Adya image must be made of eight metals. Ramakrishna predicted that, when religion fades from the world, only Adyapeeth will remain as a place where God might manifest. And it must be built in Bengal, for "devotion still pervades the land there," and it is the only land which responds to the divine call. Ramakrishna also told Annada to cut down his penance to one year with his family, and then one year on the Ganges with his wife. After that, he should start building the temple.

Ramakrishna also gave a vision of the future temple to Annada's friend Dhiren, who drew up the plans. In 1913, the first religious festival to the goddess was held on Makar Sankranti day, on land held temporarily. Annada set up a missionary society, the Ramakrishna Sangha at Dakshineswar, and officially established Adyapeeth in 1914. Land was bought at Dakshineswar, and the foundation was laid in 1920. All sorts of people contributed towards the fund raising. One year later, Annada Thakur died. There was chaos immediately afterwards, but the building continued. His wife oversaw work on the temple, and added a Matri Ashram for elderly woman renunciants. In 1926, they began building the marble-faced temple, and in 1959 the images were consecrated and installed. Many more buildings have been added. It has become a major tourist attraction, part of the "holy trinity" of religious sites of Dakshineswar, Belur Math, and Adyapeeth, near Calcutta.

Adyapeeth, also known as the Dakshineswar Ramkrishna Sangha, is considered by devotees to be a modern addition to the numerous sakta pithas of West Bengal, sanctified by the will of Adya Shakti Kali. It is a large temple complex, with a central temple and a new hall next to it. This is the Mother Theresa hall, large enough to feed two thousand people in long rows on the floor each day. Meals cost about two rupees, and the destitute eat for free; meal tickets are sold by monks. There are marble floors, inscribed with the history of the place and the names of donors (there are over a thousand names). Surrounding the two central buildings is a courtyard, and around

them are other lemon-colored buildings: offices, orphanages (separate ones for older and younger boys, and older and younger girls) which are called ashrams, and housing for the renunciant monks and nuns.

The oldest area includes Annada Thakur's house and temple, with a pond, near a banyan tree; and later buildings include the library, offices, kitchens, and meeting halls (including a Vanaprastha meeting hall for older people), as well as parking areas and other living quarters under construction. It is run by a General Secretary, who is also called brother, and the position rotates every few years. Major decisions are made by the Temple Committee.

All members dress in lemon yellow robes, and the orphanage girls wear yellow saris with red borders. It is run largely by donation, and its public functions are attended by Bengali politicians and businessmen (one celebration which I attended included the Governor of West Bengal, the Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court, the Ministers of Commerce and Labor, the Director General of the Police, and various heads of businesses as speakers).

Fund-raising is very important, and most monks spend time at it. Funds are often donated for specific purposes: paint, food, cars, buildings. One Bombay singer donated a jeep to carry medicine (which is not for the use of the renunciants). Monks and nuns do prayers at dawn, evening and night, give lectures, work at the clinic, teach religion classes at the school, take classes (especially Sanskrit), edit their journal (called Matri-puja), do cooking and serving meals, and cleaning. Only brahmins work in the temple. More than five hundred people live and work at Adyapeath, ranging in age from about ten years on.

Adyapeath sponsors pujas and prayers, and they open up their triple statue to public view twice a day- for a half hour in the morning, and a half hour in the evening. Hymns to Kali (Kali kirtan) are sung by groups of devotees during this period. There are homa fire sacrifices twice a day, with vegetables and milk products, and large yearly pujas for Durga and Kali, with high attendance. There are offerings of bananas, vermillion, rice and sweets, though on Durga Puja there is immolation of a statue of an asura or demon made of flour. Devotees perform vows (manat) and ask for boons, usually dealing with wealth, fertility and health. People meditate in front of the goddess, and repeat her name or chant hymns. Adya Shakti Kali was believed to have spoken to Annada Thakur, and to be willing to speak with other sincere devotees. However, the current General Secretary has said that he has

not had people report their personal experiences to him.

Both Annada Thakur and his wife Manikuntala are worshipped at Adyapeath, and a variety of hymns have been written to them by devotees. Adyapeath has published a book of songs, Guruguna Gan, which contains a variety of hymns. In one, called "Annadakirtana", Annada is portrayed as an emotional devotee, and as virtually an incarnation of Adya Shakti Kali:

Let us all sing the song of Annada
And cry while chanting his praises.
He gave the treasure of Adya Ma
By (the grace of) his guru Ramakrishna.
He was a child in the lap of his mother
He would laugh, weep, dance and sing
He lost himself in the mother, and gave the mother's mantra
He gave the mother's love to earth.
It was [really] the mother who posed as Annada
Mother Adya was in the form of Annada
[She came] to console her children.
She wanted her created beings to do karma yoga and sakti sadhana...
O mind, remember the words of Annada, which bring us merit
"You will have countless experiences of devotional love (prema bhakti)
Your purified mind will be filled with love
Because you have done meditation in the mood of the mother (matribhava)
You will see the image of the couple before your eyes."

The song "Matritarpana" is dedicated to Annada Thakur's wife Manikuntala Devi. It is also implied that she is a goddess:

Come, all who are devotees of the mother, disciples and servants Sing the mother's glory.
Annada's devotee, Manikuntala Devi, lovingly called Mamami
Was both a householder and a yogini.
Chant her praises from the center of your heart.
She married Annada at the will of his dying mother
Because of his devotion to the mother
When her mother-in-law saw her standing to the left of Annada
The critically-ill woman was cured.
The world became full of joy
And Yama [lord of death] left the village...
Mother, you are an equal partner in Annada's spiritual life

Have you left [Mount] Kailash to come to earth To help this suffering world?
You have given your life in sacrifice.
History states that the Rajput women
Would send their beloved husbands to war
To win heroic victory, and follow their dharma.
But mother, you have humbled the pride of those kings and queens
You allowed your husband to go to the forest
To do spiritual practice, and attain his goddess (istadevi)...
By your attention to the needs of others
You charmed everyone, wherever you went.
You gained fame through your manners and dignity...
You are another form (vigraha) of Thakur
You are equal to him in love and religious experience (bhava).
O mother, arise in the heart of your child
Bring your gentle memories.
Unless there is meditation in the mother's spirit
Affection among brothers will disappear.
As your husband is Thakur, so you are Thakurani.
[On earth] you flashed like lightning
Why did you leave us so soon?

Partly due to Annada Thakur's influence and the large number of pilgrims visiting Adyapeath, Adya Shakti Kali has become quite a popular deity in West Bengal. Thakur's revelation was in the style of folk bhakti- complete with getting a goddess' statue through a dream command and threats if he did not obey her.

While Annada Thakur had stated that Adya Shakti Kali herself had wanted worship through her photograph (or "photo-bhakti" as one person phrased it), clearly the tradition of worshiping via statues is preferred by many Shaktas. However, photos are very convenient, and in many urban areas have taken over the areas which used to hold larger altars and statues.

The influence of Annada Thakur is clear as one travels the streets of Calcutta and sees the picture of Adya Shakti displayed on altars in many shops and homes. Though it is not mentioned whether Annada Thakur became a formal guru giving initiation to students, the people's respect and admiration for him, the form of the goddess he popularized, and the institution he founded demonstrate the power of religion in their lives and their close connection to

the goddess.

Annada Thakur's main guru was Ramakrishna who died shortly before Annada was born. He saw his guru only in dreams and visions. He relied upon his connection with the deity Adya Ma and his inner guru for spiritual guidance during his lifetime. He is a good example of a visionary seeker who did not really require an outer guru because his spiritual skills allowed him to be directed by inner sources of information and inspiration.

The biography is more detailed than other biographies in this selection because there are no books available in America on the life of Annada Thakur.
